



Interpreting Ethical Appeals – “Letter from Birmingham Jail” Foundation Lesson – High School

Skill Focus

Levels of Thinking				
Remember	Understand	Apply	Analyze	Evaluate
Close Reading	Grammar	Composition		
Reading Strategies Determining Author's Purpose Generalization Inference Seminar/Discussion Summary Literary Elements Detail Diction connotation Tone Literary Techniques Allusion Argumentation ethical appeals	Parts of Speech	Types Expository analytical		

Materials and Resources

- “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” by Martin Luther King, Jr.
- Close Reading Lesson: “Interpreting Emotional Appeals”
- Close Reading Lesson: “Interpreting Logical Appeals”

Lesson Introduction

During non-violent demonstrations for racial equality in Birmingham, Alabama, Martin Luther King was arrested and jailed for eight days. He wrote this letter to white clergymen to explain his actions and to answer those people who urged him to call off the demonstrations he had called for. He responds to his critics who claim that he and other African-Americans should wait for the federal, state, and local governments to make changes.

In King’s letter, he effectively uses all three appeals – logical, emotional, and ethical. *Ethos* in Greek loosely translates to “character.” In effective argumentation, effective writers not only possess good character but also argue in ways that reveal that good character. *How* a politician addresses opposing views, for instance, and *how* a persuasive essayist makes claims can reveal whether or not the politician or essayist argues from the sound base of personal integrity. The audience should see writers as people very much like themselves (or the way they ideally would *like* to be). Therefore, writers must establish credibility with the audience. Persuasive writers must convince their audience that they have the audience’s best interests at heart. Controlling diction, which controls tone, is one way to appeal to the audience. Skilled persuasive writers will avoid inflammatory language and use language appropriate for the occasion. Writers who use inflammatory language will not persuade anyone and may, in fact, antagonize any readers not already on their side.



Interpreting Ethical Appeals – “Letter from Birmingham Jail” Foundation Lesson – High School

Study the following paragraphs from Martin Luther King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” paragraphs in which he employs an ethical appeal to convince his audience that his actions are moral and just.

I think I should indicate why I am here in Birmingham, since you have been influenced by the view which argues against “outsiders coming.” I have the honor of serving as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, an organization operating in every southern state, with headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia. We have some eighty-five affiliated organizations across the South, and one of them is the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights. Frequently we share staff, educational, and financial resources with our affiliates. Several months ago the affiliate here in Birmingham asked us to be on call to engage in a nonviolent direct-action program if such were deemed necessary. We readily consented, and when the hour came we lived up to our promise. So I, along with several members of my staff, am here because I was invited here. I am here because I have organizational ties here.

But more basically, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their “thus saith the Lord” far beyond the boundaries of their home towns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco-Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my home town. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid.

1. Discuss with your classmates the way King uses the following techniques for developing an ethical appeal:
 - restates opposing views(s) accurately and fairly
 - associates self with relevant authorities
 - makes relevant allusions
 - uses first-person plural pronouns to establish a relationship between writer and audience
 - uses reasonable language, avoiding an inflammatory tone
2. Write a one-to-two page essay analyzing the ways in which King uses ethical appeals to influence his audience.